Covert actions damaged U.S. reputation say authorities

WASHINGTON (AP) — Covert action aimed against foreign governments has damaged the reputation of the United States and should be severely curbed, four national security authorities said Friday.

"Many of the problems which beset the intelligence community result from historical slips on the banana peel of covert action," said David A. Phillips, a former Central Intelligence Agency official and a veteran of many undercover operations.

"Our reputation has been damaged and our capacity for ethical and moral world leadership has been impaired," said former Defense Secretary Clark Clifford.

Clifford told the Senate Intelligence Committee it is clear that covert operations have gotten out of hand.

"The knowledge regarding such operations has become so widespread," he said, "that our country has been accused of being responsible for practically every internal difficulty that has occurred in every country in the world."

Cyrus Vance, former deputy secretary of defense, says he believes it should be U.S. policy to engage in covert actions only when it is "absolutely essential" to the security of the nation.

Vance said in the past there have been times when hundreds of such actions have been going on at once but that under his test, "I believe the number of covert actions would be very, very small."

The various witnesses served under both Republican and Democratic presidents. By covert operations, they were referring to secret actions taken to influence another country's attitudes and public opinion, including attempts to change the government or course of events. Most of the witnesses did not oppose other intelligence-gathering operations.

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